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20 July 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. SHERMAN KENT

FROM:

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SUBJECT: Substantive Post Mortems

1. My swan song for the year. I end up with very negative conclusions. However, in view of the heavy work load coming up and the personnel shortages, I think it advisable to look long at the magnitude of the job and the probable commensurate returns before embarking on this project.

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2. First, it is impractical to post mortem our entire production of estimates. For example, a useful purpose would be served by assessing the accuracy of estimates which dealt with the probable consequences of events which never took place. It is also doubtful whether it would be worth the effort to post mortem those estimates which are revised on an annual basis. The revisions themselves serve as the substantive post mortem. The annual Bloc papers fall into this category, as do several of the major country papers. It would almost be safe to conclude, for example, that the validity of a given estimate (such as the North African or Latin American papers) is in part determined by the amount of time which elapses before it needs revision.

3. Another difficulty is the usefulness of post mortems on estimates on situations which depend in their development on what action the US takes. Examples are the Suez dispute, Guatemala, Trieste, etc. If developments in these areas do not come out as predicted by us, it is not necessarily that we estimated wrong, but merely that the US took the required steps to prevent our estimate from proving accurate. A good example of this was our estimate in 1952 that the Shah was through. Our estimate would almost certainly have been accurate had the US not taken decisive action.

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4. A further category of estimates not usefully post mortemable are the very long range papers -- such as The Outlook for Western Europe over the Next Decade.

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5. Finally, there is no use running a post mortem on an estimate which has not yet run out.

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6. A far more fundamental obstacle to a useful substantive post mortem derives from the basic nature and purposes of estimates, possibly even from misconceptions about the meaning of the word estimate. An estimate need not be equated with a prediction. It is folly to expect anyone to predict precisely what will happen. Most specific future events are essentially unpredictable. Therefore, a box score on our predictions of specific future events is by no means a true measure of our success or failure. A far more accurate yardstick is our ability to estimate the main forces or trends at work in the world or bearing on a given problem. Such an estimate is more valuable to the policy maker than any number of precise predictions of specific events. It provides him with the knowledge he needs in order to decide what to do about a situation. However, the more our estimates are general discussions of basic forces and trends, the harder it's to determine unequivocally and meaningfully through a post mortem how accurate we were.

7. This leads to the proposition that a substantive post mortem on the bulk of our "probable developments" type papers is really no more nor less than a new estimate. To determine whether what we said two years ago about West Germany is coming true requires almost as much research as would be needed for a new estimate. And after you had finished a new estimate of the current situation in West Germany there is no guarantee that it would be in such a form as to permit meaningful comparison with the old one.

8. As a further consideration, it is difficult to see how a substantive post mortem can be directly useful in producing new estimates in the future. A post mortem on a two-year-old estimate may well in effect be one group of persons in 1954 criticising the work done by an entirely different group of people, who are maybe no longer even in the government. Who, therefore, does a post mortem of this kind educate? Moreover, how would it be possible to determine why a wrong estimate was made? The most that could be gained would be a clearer idea of the kinds of specific future events it would be wiser not to attempt to predict.

9. One can conclude from the foregoing that a post mortem is an extremely difficult thing to prepare. However, in anticipation of the Clark investigation, we could certainly extract quotes from past estimates which showed us in good light. On the other hand, an investigator with only rudimentary insight should easily see that a different set of extracts in different context could make us look pretty bad. It would be easy for him to conclude that we were merely trying to whitewash ourselves.

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10. In conclusion, an overall comprehensive post mortem would almost certainly not produce results commensurate with the effort involved. A box score on specific predictions would be misleading and not a true measure of our success. A brief essay type paper demonstrating that we had consistently produced timely and accurate estimates of the major trends and forces in the world as a guide to policy makers might be of some usefulness. This should include a clear exposition of the purpose of our estimates as touched on in paragraph X above.

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